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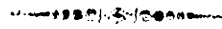
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AN ESSAY

ON CREDULITY,

BY WILLIAM PRESTON, ESQ.



La plus utile, et la moins avancée de toutes les connoissances humaines, me paroît être celle de l'homme.

ROUSSEAU.

INTRODUCTION.

AMIDST the spirit of research and the general extension of knowledge, which have distinguished the present age, some departments of science have not been cultivated as much as they deserve. The natural history of the mind and the philosophy of the passions are, surely, objects of the utmost moment to human happiness; and yet they have not been studied in equal degree with the animal oeconomy of man, and other creatures, or even with the nature and properties of the vegetable and mineral kingdoms; although the materials and leading facts, which might serve to found the conclusions of moral investigation are more numerous, more faithfully detailed, and more methodically digested, than the experiments on which natural philosophers have built their theories. What is history but a collection of experiments in human conduct, or, in other words, the natural details of moral agency? and, in addition to the data, which history furnishes, without travelling abroad, without risk, or expence, every man has within himself an object of interesting investigation, and the means of extending his knowledge of the moral part of human nature, whereas an extended acquaintance with the animal, the vegetable, or mineral kingdoms, requires distant voyages, fatiguing journies, personal danger.

The importance of a knowledge of the human mind, and of the springs and motives of moral agency may be estimated, by the degree of success, and superiority among men, which it usually insures to the possessor.

Why

Why have *Plutarch's Lives* been the favorite volumes of the wise and great, in every country, where letters are known? and why have they contributed so largely to the formation of statesmen and heroes?—they open to us the secret recesses and sanctuaries of mind; they unlock the casket of the human breast; and expose to view the minute springs of action. It is the duty and the interest of every body, but it is doubly the duty and the interest of those, to whom the task of governing men is confided, to study the human heart, and to consider well the springs, the most frequent and powerful motives of human action.

Notwithstanding a diligent study of history supplies much of that kind of knowledge, which is requisite for the purpose of managing the passions and prejudices of men, and of applying them in the production of great political movements, and important revolutions; yet, neither the study of history, nor an acquaintance with the theoretical writers on government and morals will suffice, without the aid of a practical and self-acquired experience of the ways of men, which in the critical moments, and cardinal turns and vicissitudes of fortune, should be combined with natural sagacity. We have read of many artful adventurers, like *Cromwell*, who have been able to acquire this most important knowledge, and to apply it successfully, in the accomplishment of their daring schemes, and in the direction and government of their fellow men; and this without any aid from literature, or the study of books. It is thus we often see, that the knowledge and use of the most efficacious and drastic medicines rests with irregular and unauthorized empirics, who are openly despised, and secretly envied, by the graduated practitioner. Yet should not men be discouraged, on this account, from resorting to the aid of science; or think, that diligence and regular studies are indifferent to their success.

To this knowledge of the human mind we may attribute, in most instances, the surprising aggrandizement of obscure and low-born individual; the effect which seemingly light and trivial incidents have on the destinies of men; and the mighty and stupendous commotions and revolutions, which take place in states and empires, by the intervention of mean and despised agents, and the operation of apparently inadequate causes;

in fine, all those events, which mock the rules of human wisdom, and the laws of moral calculation, and are ascribed, by superficial observers, to chance or fortune. What a striking analogy prevails between the physical and moral world! what minute invisible materials, how secret in their generation, and low, in their original, of how little weight or power, in the disjunctive, are the seeds of commotion or change, in the material world, congregated together, and sublimed in air, or concealed and labouring in the womb of earth, they produce the storm and tempest; overwhelm the strong tower; uproot the giant oak; tear the solid rock from its base; change the course of mighty rivers; and swallow up populous cities, with their inhabitants! equally minute, impalpable, and of small moment and estimation, in the eyes of superficial observers, are, at most times, the political agencies and moral causes, which fill the intellectual system with storm, convulsion, change and dissolution, which subvert the most powerful states, and the most absolute sovereignties; and prostrate on earth, or engulph from view, all that has been, for ages, reputed most great and venerable among men.

When we consider the various springs and motives of human action, which the daring and impetuous may employ, by chance, the profound and politic, on principle and by design, to gain a power, and purchase, with which they turn and wield the human instrument, and make it most efficaciously perform the purposed work of the mover; we must be convinced, that there is none more potent than the *Principle of Credulity*.—The force and aptitude of epidemic credulity, and of popular delusion to forward, and even to produce great revolutions, is exemplified, in almost every page of his history. We shall see, particularly, in the details of civil commotion, how this great moving spring is perpetually touched, and practically employed: sometimes to agitate religious enthusiasm, to render a sect, a party, or an individual odious: at other times, to conciliate towards them the confidence and attachment of a populace. Sometimes, the principle of credulity becomes the means of misleading the public attention, of impressing false notions of the views and motives of governments, and states; and of concealing their real characters, and purposes.

Sometimes, it diffuses panic fears, and causeless desperation, the source of maddening tumult and cruel outrage. At other times, it takes possession of the public imagination with *high conceits engendering pride*, it raises airy hopes; intoxicates the multitude with vain confidence; it impels them to enterprises above their strength, and contrary to their interests—without descending to modern instances, we may see this exemplified, in the disastrous attempt of the *Athenians* in *Sicily*.

Superficial observers, indeed, must they be, and wholly unacquainted with the human heart, who consider the prevalence of floating rumours, and the unhappy assiduity, the invention fertile in poisons of those, who operate on the public credulity, as light and trivial objects: they most vitally affect the government of states, and the subsisting order of things. No principles of reason, however certain, are able to set bounds to the torrent of credulous delusion; no circumstances of probability, however obvious, are able, when set in opposition to the multiplied horrors, antipathes, and prejudices of prevailing rumour, to gain the least attention from the populace, and the great and the rich, when they do not avail themselves of the advantages of their education, when they revolt from the guidance of reason and are swayed by absurd and vulgar motives: what are they but a populace?—the powerful effects of popular credulity, the great use, which may be made of it, in producing revolutionary movements, and the arts, which may be employed, to inflame the passions of the multitude, through this medium, are fully exemplified, in the mournful details, of that civil conflict, which conducted the unhappy *Charles* to a scaffold, and the successful usurper to supreme command. Were any additional illustration requisite, to this subject, we may find it in the history of the present *French* revolution, which in many of its features, will be found to bear a most striking similitude, to that which convulsed *Britain*.

When the delusion, excited by popular credulity, has taken entire possession of the mind, it becomes a most powerful source of actions, and im-
parts

See Hume's history of England: Vol. 6. and 7. particularly, for various passages to this effect.

parts a supernatural and inconceivable degree of strength, and energy, like that which delirium bestows on the maniac. According to the circumstances, that exist at the moment, or the bias impressed, by those who are interested in guiding the movements of the populace, it rouses the good, or the bad passions, hope or despair, courage or fear, mercy or cruelty; its operations are instantaneous and involuntary; the people are scarcely conscious of their own acts; they rush, with impetuosity, to effectuate mighty changes unforeseen by themselves.—It is the office of great address and ability, in the statesman, or the general, who has studied the human character, to seize the public mind in this moment of ignition; to strike without respite, and forge and fashion it, to his will; whether he designs, to make it an instrument of good, or to employ it, as a powerful engine of destruction. We shall be convinced of the immense force, and diffusion of panic credulity, by considering, that it propagates itself, and at the same time increases its momentum, in a sort of geometrical progression. Every man, who is fully possessed with it, is anxious to infect others, and becomes an apostle of delusion, to a circle, that surrounds him. When the influence of credulity becomes thus epidemic, reason is silent; law and authority are inoperative; it is vain to oppose mounds, to the popular torrent. In proportion as the agents and managers of parties are low, worthless, and unprincipled; in proportion, as parties themselves are exasperated against each other; persons will be found more ready, both to circulate and to credit such pernicious falsehoods; and the work of general delusion and fanatical imposture will be rendered more extensive, and more ruinous.

Through this principle of credulity, we often find a whole nation adopting the passions and prejudices of an individual. The people are thus rendered their own, dupes;* and impose on themselves through the medium of their own adopted passions. They resign themselves, to the delusions of fancy; and are hurried on blindly and madly, at the suggestions

(G 2)

of

* In the year 1626 we find the British House of Commons making open profession of credulity, and giving sanction to popular rumour by a vote of the legislature. “On some queries of Dr. Turner’s, it was voted, (says *Hume*) “that common fame was sufficient ground of accusation by the Commons. Vol. 6,”

of craft and folly. When the general mind is thus inflamed, when all the furious emotions are brought into act, the moral and physical power of our nature are in arms; all the metes and bounds of civil order are violated; the people under such circumstances exhibit a curious but a tremendous spectacle; they rush on, like an impetuous torrent of ignited lava; and every thing they touch is destroyed, or assimilated. In fact, there is no power, in the whole mechanism of moral existence, which has such momentum, as fanatic credulity; all things seem possible to him who firmly believes, and where all things seem possible, there is in reality a kind of omnipotency. For often it is only necessary to make the attempt, in order to succeed; and the very difficulty and wildness of the attempt prove the cause of success. Fanatic credulity becomes the fruitful parent of every crime; inasmuch as it is the most prevailing engine, by which the spirit of faction is raised. It is no wonder, that faction is so productive of vices and crimes of every kind; for it not only inflames the passions, and particularly the worst passions, but it also tends to remove the care of reputation, and the great restraints of honor and shame; while men find, that no iniquities or atrocities can lose them, the countenance and applause of their own party: and that no innocence of intention or rectitude of conduct can secure them against the calumnies of their opponents. The feelings and opinions of men in a gregarious state, are not their own; they borrow them, by a sort of electric impulse, suddenly, and in spite of themselves; and they find them roused and augmented, by a continued contact and communication, with their fellow men.

Yet, were it possible to do so, we should not wish wholly to eradicate this disposition. There was a wise reason, for implanting in our nature a principle of credulity, producing a proneness to believe, and a ready disposition to act upon belief: such a disposition is absolutely necessary to the conduct of social life, and to the very preservation of our existence.— So imperfect are the lights, which we receive from our senses, from reason, and from analogy; that, were we to wait for certainty, or even for strong probability, we should, on many occasions, be left without any motives

motives sufficiently strong to impel us to action. Activity and toil being necessary, not only to the perfection, but to the preservation of our nature; many of our feelings and propensities, are implanted purposely to make us active. Thus, we see, that the pernicious, the self-tormenting propensity, which eagerly receives the most monstrous and terrific rumours, and by implicit belief, raises them to importance; which disposes the young and old alike, to swallow superstitious legends, and tales of fairies, enchanters and apparitions; proceeds from the same cause, which gives the ceremonies of a rigid and gloomy religion such a strong hold on the mind, through the force of the imagination; and induces men to crowd to executions, and other spectacles of distress and horror.

The author of our nature has framed us for an active probation; in which we may earn by our actions a superior existence, and fit our mental faculties, advanced to perfection by exercise, for the enjoyment of a more exalted rank, in the chain of being, and the perception of more pure and refined pleasures. A torpid state, therefore, is peculiarly irksome to our feelings, and every thing, that rouses and puts in act the inert faculties of man, accords with his nature, and powerfully draws him with a secret charm. Every thing which tends to excite passion, whether of wonder, fear, anger, hatred, love or pity, it matters not, is of this kind. It relieves us from the listlessness, the weary stagnation, which is so irksome to the spirit. It is from this cause, that we catch with so much eagerness, at the delusions of popular rumour; they give employment to the mind. Fame descends with her wings, like the angel in scripture, and agitates the stagnant pool. Thus necessary to our state and being here is credulity. It has often been employed, no doubt, with destructive artifice, by crafty politicians. It has, at times, contributed to hide from the people their true interests, to alienate them from their true friends, and to impel them to violent, irrational, and atrocious measures. But even the blind excesses of credulity, and the wild paroxysms of popular delusion have sometimes been skilfully seized, and wisely directed to the best, and most salutary purposes. The most mortal poisons, as opium, hemlock, mercurial precipitate, and even

even arsenic and barytes, when judiciously exhibited, may become safe and efficacious medicines.

It is to be lamented, however, that the credulity of men has been more frequently directed to destroy, than to save; and has too commonly been productive of sanguinary rage, and cruel persecution. The destruction of a party, the extinction of a sect, the downfall of a minister or favourite, the accomplishment of a revolution, such are the objects to which it is generally directed, and these objects it cannot obtain, but through the medium of the passions and feelings, which too frequently prompt men to deeds of atrocity. At different periods, there have unhappily been peculiar objects of popular odium and popular credulity. Under the first *Roman* emperors, the primitive *Christians* were the subjects of general hatred and obloquy; the most heinous crimes, and abominable practices were imputed to them, and the imputation was received, as fact, by popular credulity, during the earlier ages of Christianity. Under the *Greek* emperors, this principle took a new direction, but was uniform, in its tendency, to excite sanguinary rage and cruelty; and the *Sorcerers* became objects of universal fear and abhorrence. Sorcery was exalted into a state crime, a most cruel and general persecution was excited, and multitudes perished under the imputation of this imaginary delinquency. At an æra somewhat more advanced, the *Jews* became objects of hatred and persecution; and popular invention and popular credulity were busy, to forge and disseminate a thousand horrid and improbable tales, calculated to provoke or justify the excesses, which were practised against those wretched people.* Thus, every age has had its own peculiar bugbears, its objects of credulous fascination, of horrible and monstrous fiction, and of blind antipathy; and perhaps, were it necessary to resort to more modern periods, it would appear, that they have not been, nor are they even now devoid of their phantasms and spectres

* It was generally believed, among other things, that they used to entice away Christian children, and sacrifice them.

spectres of hatred and dismay, raised by credulity, and calculated to alarm not only women and children, but even the sage and enlightened.

Credulity has not, I believe, been expressly and distinctly considered, by any writer of metaphysics or morality, as an inherent principle of the human mind, or an object of scientific investigation. It has been carelessly consigned to the lighter essayist, to the comic or satiric writer, as the theme of casual reprobation, or the subject of ludicrous portraiture. Yet the consideration of credulity is of a much higher and more important nature; it is necessary to the history of the human mind, and tends to disclose the springs of human action. In considering the doctrine of faith or assent to propositions not demonstrable, our best metaphysical writers have paid little attention to this principle. We have been taught, to discuss the nature and grounds of faith, too much in the abstract; we have been only led to consider man, as if he were perfect and unimpassioned, as if reason sat unmolested in every breast, calmly adjusting with her scale and ballance, the degrees of faith, according to the preponderance of argument, or of testimony. The effects of passion, of temperament, of caprice, of education, of external accidents, are not taken sufficiently into the account. No allowance is made for the *foregone conclusions*,* for the preparation of the mind of the hearer. I flatter myself, that an attempt to consider this subject, in a point of view somewhat novel, will not be unacceptable to the reader; although I can boast of nothing more than the mere attempt. I am conscious, that I have been betrayed into much prolixity, and yet have been able to say very little. The nature of my subject led me, of necessity, to employ some illustrations and examples from history; but I have studied to avoid, with a scrupulous care, which, in my mind, even borders on prudery and affectation, all that might seem an introduction of modern politics. It would have been easy to have swelled this essay to a considerable volume, by an accumulation of historical illustrations, and perhaps, to have found many more opposite, than those which I have selected; but it is not amiss, to leave something to be supplied, by the industry and sagacity of the reader.

SECTION

* Shakespeare.

SECTION I.

*Credulity is an innate principle, and distinguished from rational belief—
Use of credulity—it is sometimes joined with distrust and suspicion, and
why—Instances of successful imposture, adduced to shew the general pre-
valence of Credulity.*

Credulity is a principle inherent in man, and admirably adapted to the limited nature of his faculties, his situation on earth, and the ends of his being. Destined to collect analogies, and govern his conduct, by assenting to probabilities, he feels, that an innate impulse predisposes him to credit an assertion or a narrative, on the mere authority of the relator. It requires some degree of practice and attention, to make the mind an object to itself, to catch its fugitive operations, and impulses to fix and anatomize what is volatile and in motion; but self-knowledge demands it. We must be convinced, that *credulity* is an instinctive and universal propensity of unsophisticated unadulterated man; if we will but watch the operations of our own minds, when we yield our belief to any asseveration or story. Our assent seems to be independent and instantaneous, without reference and without gradation: belief, in fact, seems to be rather an emotion of feeling, than an operation of intellect. This disposition is prevalent, in proportion as our feelings are lively, and our passions ardent. Infancy and youth are the seasons of fond belief, and unsuspecting confidence; age as it chills the bosom, and nips the bloom of hope, represses the facility of belief. In the great school of the world, we gradually learn distrust, and suspicion. Frequently deceived, we are, at length, taught, by fatal experience, to suspect deceit and falsehood, in our brethren; and begin to question the veracity of an assertion, or the credibility of a witness. We discover, to our sorrow, that, the native integrity of men, and the inborn propensity to love and practise truth are not sufficient guarantees against dissimulation, fraud, and falsehood; and begin to enquire, what secret motives may pervert and trouble the pure stream of sincerity. What interest or advantage
men

men may find, or promise to themselves from the propagation of an untruth. As children and novices are thus prone to belief, we find, also, that the principle of credulity is more strong in rude and unpolished nations, who still remain nearer to a state of nature than among those people, who have attained to a greater pitch of refinement. All this may serve to convince us, that credulity is an innate principle. In speaking here of the principle of credulity, and considering it, as innate, I speak only, with a reference to the popular and instinctive kind of faith or belief, which every man feels within himself, and which is the chief spring of action, in the common transactions of life. There is another kind of faith or assent more sedate and elaborate in kind, which must be distinguished from this, which I call credulity.

Credulity is instinctive and instantaneous, the other kind of faith technical and progressive. Credulity seems to be the child of feeling, the other species the work of intellect. Credulity occurs every day, every hour. It attends the most common propositions. It takes place, in the most ordinary occurrences of life. The other kind of faith appears, in the gradual yielding, and chastised assent of the mind, to preponderating evidence, whether we decide on controverted points of history, and contested facts in juridical proceedings, or yield to the conviction, that accompanies the truths of religion. The one, as I have said, predominates from nature; and its force and degree depend on the temper and feelings of each person; the other on his understanding the degree of his sagacity, and the perfection of his reasoning powers. In this, however, they agree, that the prevalence or absence of the one and the other will be regulated in a great measure, by the education, the habits, the society, the pursuits, and course of study of the individual. The first lies within the province of morality, should be regulated by law and rules, is to be restrained like other passions or propensities, and is address'd by motives; the other belongs to logic and metaphysics, is independent of motives, and capable of strict demonstration. The neglect of distinguishing sufficiently between two principles of assent, so different in themselves, must be productive of considerable obscurity and confusion. It should

be remembered that these are not different shades or degrees of the same operation; but operations of the mind totally distinct, it will be adviseable when we speak or write concerning them to employ terms peculiarly appropriate; and to call the rational the inductive or comparative ground of assent to a proposition *faith*, while we exclusively term the instinctive or implicit principle of belief *credulity*. It is the principle of credulity which I mean to consider, in the progress of this essay. *Plutarch* has remarked that credulity is an innate principle in man; and to confirm this position, he observes, that all men are fond of dreams and omens, that is to say of divination. On the same principle it is, that we find old and young, greedily swallowing superstitious legends, and tales of fairies and enchanters. On the same principle it is, that rigid, gloomy and mysterious forms of religion, where much is unexplained, and much is required to be implicitly received, as matter of faith, have ever taken a fast hold on the imagination, and to this cause, too, may we ascribe the love of quacks, of charlatans, and impostors, which prevails and manifests itself in the populace of every country.

It may be said, that credulity cannot be supposed to be an innate or universal principle; or at least that distrust is a principle equally general and equally innate; since we find that the vulgar and savages are commonly suspicious and distrustful; and what is yet stranger, that even in those people collectively, and individuals seperately, where credulity prevails we find it joined in many instances with a distrustful suspicious temper. It is observed by some traveller respecting the inhabitants of *Paris*, that, while, from time immemorial, they have swallowed, and seemed nearly to live upon an eternal succession of the most absurd and improbable tales, plain undisguised truth has been received by them with caution and doubt, and supposed to conceal some guile, deception, or disguise. Something of the same kind is observable in the *English* nation, a people, at once slow and impetuous, distrustful and credulous, ever on its guard against deceit, yet for ever the prey of false pretensions, frauds, and impositions. The fact cannot be denied, it is perhaps among the paradoxes and inconsistencies of our nature. Yet, I think the seeming inconsistencies, I have stated,

stated, may be rationally reconciled. The credulity is natural and spontaneous, the distrust is adventitious and acquired by good habit. Even the savages of *America* are not in a pure state of nature. Society, though rude among them, is yet sufficiently advanced to bring with it some of the vices necessarily attendant on the civil combinations of men. Wars being introduced, distrust and suspicion, the necessary consequence of fear and hatred, must follow in their train. The mode of carrying on war among savage nations is usually a system of fraud and deception; but the natural disposition of a savage, when he is in a state of peace, and left to himself, free from the influence of the extrinsic dispositions, which the new relations and situations of society have imposed on him, is, to practice and love truth himself, and to expect and believe, that he shall meet with veracity in others. If, with respect to the *European* traveller, or *American* settler, the savage appears to depart from his principle of credulity; and to shew a spirit of indiscriminate distrust; we must consider, that this distrust is the child of woeful experience; and that the repeated frauds, perfidies, usurpations and wrongs of his christian neighbours too generally justify the harshest conclusion, which the savage can draw within his own breast. When we find distrust prevalent among the vulgar, in a more advanced state of society; we must account for it, by their having observed, and perhaps imbibed a portion of the vices of society, which leads them to distrust others, from a consciousness of what passes in their own minds. This tendency to distrust is not in them a settled principle. It is a mere impulse and emotion, like their credulity; and is the result of the scattered impressions, which they derive from a rude, imperfect, and depraved intercourse with mankind, thus, it happens, that credulity and distrust often prevail in the same bosom, actuate it alternately, and succeed to each other instantaneously, without any guide or principle but the caprice of the moment.

An argument, to shew that the natural disposition of man includes a principle of credulity, may be drawn from the facility, which various impostors, in different ages of the world, have found in establishing their pretensions; and the success, and influence over the human mind, which

have usually attended their illusions and artifices. *Sertorius*, by a judicious direction of the credulity of mankind, and the adoption of means suited to operate on tempers where it was predominant, was enabled to maintain an ascendancy for many years over barbarous nations, among whom he was a stranger and led them on to victory, against the most consummate warriors in the world. *Apollonius* of *Tyana* of whom *Philostratus* has related so many strange things, pretended to understand all languages, without having learned them; to know the thoughts of men; and to understand the oracles delivered by the chirping of birds; *Antoninus Caracalla*, *Severus*, and *Aurelian* believed in his divinity; and his fictitious miracles were opposed to those of *Christ*, by the advocates for paganism. *Lactantius* tells us, he continued to be worshipped, in the beginning of the fourth century. “*Simulachrum ejus sub Herculis alexi-
“caci nomine ab Ephesis etiam num honorari.*” *Divin. Instit. Lib. 5. Cap 3.* *Mahomet*, by taking advantage of the credulity of mankind, became, at once, a prophet, and a conqueror, the founder of a most diffusive and prevailing sect of religion, and of mighty and extensive empires,* among tribes who were persuaded of his divine mission, and immediate intercourse with heaven†.

It must be admitted in favour of the natural disposition of man to veracity, that the first commencement of imposture has most usually been fortuitous. Thus it was with respect to *Mahomet*. Being subject to attacks of epilepsy, and wishing to conceal this infirmity from his wife, he told her that his convulsions were occasioned by the sight of the angel *Gabriel*, who came to reveal to him many things, in the name of God.

Cadigba

* Whenever *Mahomet* had some scandal to remove, some discontents of the people to pacify, or some new thing to be done, he had recourse to the angel *Gabriel*, for some new revelation; and inserted in the *Alcoran* an addition to answer the ends proposed, hence almost the whole of the *Alcoran* is a tissue of contradiction.

† *John Matthias* and *John Bocold*, the leaders of the Anabaptists in *Munster*, are among the most distinguished instances of those who have obtained a most absolute sovereignty over the minds of men, through the medium of their credulity. The latter proclaimed himself King of *Sion*, and taught his deluded followers to expect divine assistance.

Cadigba immediately went about, and told from house to house, that her husband was a prophet; and endeavoured to procure him followers. It is observable, that a similar infirmity induced a woman in *England* of the name of *Elizabeth Barton*, to commence prophets. She too had many followers; and was able to persuade them that the access of her disease was a divine trance, during which she was favoured with revelations from heaven. It is not improbable, that the inspiration of the *Pythian* priests was of the same nature; and that she had habitually acquired the power of working herself into trances and convulsions. *Cromwell*, at his first outset in life, was sincerely and truly an enthusiast. He first deceived himself, and afterwards became the deceiver of his adherents. His dissimulation was gradual, it was forced on him by incidents; and he was borne on, by the stream of events, to sovereign hypocrisy, and sovereign power. "In fact, there is nothing so improbable in itself, but what persons of a certain turn of mind may be predisposed to believe." Thus, we find in this enlightened age *Baron Swedenborg* has published a new religion, an account of his conversation with angels, and of the wonders of heaven and hell, and many believe in his reveries.

SECTION II.

Locke's grounds of probability do not apply to credulity which is a feeling. Reason, with respect to Credulity, is rather to be employed to determine the grounds of dissent.

Locke has given us certain canons of probability, by which men may be enabled, to regulate the assent, which they ought to yield to propositions, on the credit of the propounder, but these rules have relation to the rational, the chastised, and gradual kind of Belief, which we distinguish by the name of *faith*. *Credulity*, as an innate principle, an emotion, or feeling, operates instantaneously, and without reserve: it admits neither deliberation, nor degree. It is not necessary, here, to suggest grounds of assent.

assent, every man, whose natural bias has not been strongly counteracted by education, finds those grounds within himself. He finds them, in his own temper, in his passions, and prejudices. He finds them, in the natural predisposing impulse of the moment. It is not requisite, here, then, nay, it would not, perhaps, be practicable, with respect to a subject so fluctuating and variable, to suggest grounds of assent. The mind is, of itself, but too prone to belief. Much more useful would it be, to stay the headlong current of credulity, and suggest principles of doubt,—the motives of salutary dissent. It will be found, that, when we consider popular rumours, and the usual objects of credulity, *Lock's* grounds of probability do not always furnish an effectual touchstone, by which we may bring them to the test. In popular rumours, it is not always the congruity of the matter related with the course of our own experience, or the intrinsic probability of the story, that should render us the more ready to receive and adopt it as truth. The very probability that any certain event (of great political moment and influence, for instance) may happen, will be a ground and motive for inventing a rumour,* which may realize expectation and conjecture, by announcing that it has actually happened. It is not commonly to be presumed, that the inventors of a delusive tale will perform their tasks so awkwardly or unskilfully, as to neglect the dress and circumstances of probability. A man of knowledge and address, who undertakes to impose a fiction on the public, will pay a just attention to chronology and geography. He will so far arrange the incidents in time and place, and introduce the actors of the Drama so plausibly, that he will meet and obviate the *incredulus odi*, the disposition to doubt and examine of the acute and experienced observer. Such a conduct is so natural and obvious, that, not unfrequently, too much care and solicitude, on this head, defeat the purposes of the deceiver, and become the means of detecting falsehood. I have seen it happen, on trials in the courts of justice, that different witnesses deposing to the same fact, by too nice and elaborate

* As of an important victory or defeat according to the wishes or interest of the reporter when hostile armaments are on foot;—of the rupture or conclusion of a treaty, when negotiations are pending.

elaborate an agreement, in swearing with minute precision and exactness to all the trifling and immaterial circumstances of the case, and perhaps in nearly the same terms, have impeached their own credit, and excited suspicions of their rehearsing a false and fabricated tale, dictated to them by one and the same master.

Capricious, indeed, is the nature of popular credulity; it sets all the rules of common sense and common probability at defiance. So that the success and propagation of a rumour do not always correspond to the skill and care, which the authors and contrivers have employed to dress it up, and render it credible; they depend more on the previous preparation and predisposition of the public mind. It is observed by the philosophical historian,* in speaking of the Popish plot produced by *Titus Oates*, “ that it seemed at the the time, that the very improbability of the tale, and the wild circumstances of horror and atrocity with which it was filled, by applying themselves to the imagination of the hearer, and arresting the love of the marvellous, proved its chief recommendation; and that a plot, invented by impostors of more knowledge, art and ingenuity, would not have been so successful in exciting popular attention, and diffusing parties among the vulgar. This effect, (continues he,) we may safely say, no one could before have expected, and a fool was, in this case, more likely to succeed, than a wise man. Had *Shaftsbury* laid the plan of a Popish conspiracy, he had probably rendered it moderate, consistent, credible; and on that very account, had never met with the prodigious success, with which Oates’s tremendous fictions were attended.” We have had in later times, and among an enlightened people, a strange and horrible illustration of the power of credulity, acting under the impulse of popular prejudice, despising all the rules of probability, all the laws of evidence, and receiving implicitly the most wild and revolting tales, in the tragical fate of the Calas family at *Toulouse*. Instances occur of a more light and ludicrous nature, which serve to shew, that
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the intrinsic absurdity of a report, not only does not prevent, but, to all appearance, facilitates its reception and belief among the vulgar. Such for instance, was the inspiration of Miss *Kitty Cadere* and her extatic intercourse with the seraphic *Pere Gérard*. Such the imposture of *Elizabeth Canning*, equally ridiculous and criminal; where an unfortunate woman must have fallen the victim* of wicked contrivance and popular delusion, (though the story was replete with absurdity,) to the eternal reproach of the nation, had she not been rescued, by a train of circumstantial evidence almost miraculous, furnishing proof of her innocence. Similar to this tragic farce, (although public credulity was not quite so long sustained,) was the affair of the *Cock-Lane Ghost*, yet, we find the great moral philosopher† of the country gravely employed, in an examination of this foolish conspiracy. The force of blind credulity, inspiring sanguinary rage, and nourished by wild and gloomy absurdities, applying themselves to the gross and vulgar imaginations of a populace, appears in the clamour and fury, which at different periods, have been excited against forcerers. In the earlier ages of Christianity, during the sway of the Greek emperors, multitudes perished under this ridiculous but fatal imputation. Hume observes, respecting Scotland,‡ “ the fanaticism which prevailed, so full of sour and angry principles, had acquired a new object of abhorrence, the forcerers. So prevalent was the opinion of witchcraft, that great numbers were burned by sentence of the magistrates, through all parts of Scotland. In one village near *Berwick*, which contained only fourteen houses, fourteen persons were punished with fire; and it became a science, every where much studied and cultivated, to know a true witch, by proper trials and symptoms.” The same blind, absurd credulity, the same panic abhorrence, and dread of witchcraft, engrafted on a similar stock of sour fanaticism, raged in *America*, within the present century. Norepecta-

bility,

* See the account of this strange trial which occupied an extraordinary space of time, in the collection of State Trials.

† Hume's History of England, Vol. 7th, Page 151.

‡ Dr. Johnson.

bility, no good qualities were a protection ; all ranks and conditions accused their neighbours, and, in turn, became themselves the accused. At last, after a multitude of sacrifices to this epidemic fury, the deadly accusation fastened on a clergyman, a person universally beloved, of exemplary piety, and distinguished probity. The people suddenly recovered from their frenzy, like one that awakes from an horrid dream ; they were sensible and ashamed, too late, of their folly ; they bewailed the judicial murders, of their insanity. The dreadful catastrophe of the *Calas* family above-mentioned is an instance, of blind credulity prompting stupid sanguinary rage, which one would scarcely have expected to find in an enlightened age, and civilized country, and serves to shew, that the intrinsic absurdity and improbability of a tale, do not always form an obstacle to popular belief. But indeed the strongest proof of this observation is afforded by the *English* statute-book, in the descriptions of witchcraft, which it has promulgated, and the penalties which it has enacted, against this imaginary crime.* These observations are sufficient to shew that the probability of circumstances and plausibility of a story may sometimes fail of securing for it, a favourable reception among the populace ; and, on the other hand, that the very absurdity and improbability of a tale may sometimes be the true cause of its obtaining an extensive circulation, and a ready and eager credence among the populace. Consequently, we plainly see that popular credulity is

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something

* 33d Hen. 8th. Cap. 8, makes all witchcraft and sorcery, “ felony, without benefit of clergy. And again, 1st Jac. 1st. Cap. 12, all persons invoking any evil spirit, or consulting, *covenanting with, entertaining, employing, feeding, or rewarding* any evil spirit, “ or taking up dead bodies from their graves, to be employed in any witchcraft, sorcery, charm, or enchantment, or killing or otherwise hurting any person, by such “ infernal arts ; should be guilty of *felony*, without benefit of clergy. And if any person “ should attempt by sorcery, to discover hidden treasure, or to restore stolen goods, or “ to provoke unlawful love ; or to hurt any man or beast, though the same were not “ effected, he or she should suffer imprisonment and pillory for the first offence, and “ death for the second.”—And what is, indeed, most surprising, the liberal and enlightened *Blackstone* expresses his belief of the possibility, nay, of the probability of such a crime being committed ! See *Blackstone’s Commentaries*, Vol. 4. Page 60.

something of a very unaccountable and capricious nature, which it is not easy, to reduce to any thing of a fixed or regular rule or standard. In the present state of society and morals, it will be found more useful, to curb than to excite this propensity.

Thus, although it must be admitted on all hands, that passions are implanted in our natures, by the Almighty, for the wisest and best purposes. Philosophers and divines, who have written on the subject of the passions, confine themselves to the necessity of governing and restraining them, and the most effectual modes of obtaining this end; leaving to nature the province of urging us to the gratification, and indulgence of passions and appetite.

Popular rumour sets at defiance some of the other causes of probability, which Mr. *Locke* has furnished.—Does the skill or expertness of the reporter add much to the credibility of the floating story of the hour?—Is it always taken into the account, or ought it to add much weight, if it were? I believe not. What may be gained, perhaps, on the one side, from the superior competency of the reporter, may be lost, on the other, through the additional motives for suspecting his fidelity. An intimate acquaintance with the subject of the rumour may have suggested to him the idea of fabricating some report; and enabled him to carry his purpose into effect, by making him master of such facts and terms, as qualify him to dress up fiction, in the garb of probability. If these artificers of fraud happen, not to be conversant in the affair, which is the subject matter of imposition, they will take care to associate with themselves, in the task of deceit, (unless they are gross bunglers in their trade) persons, who are capable of giving a colour to the tale. Again, the number of reporters, with respect to popular rumours, seems to add little to their credit. We are not to confound the number of reporters, asserting and disseminating any story, with the number of actual eye-witnesses, deposing to the same fact. The number of mere reporters, however great it may be, is still resolvable into the credit of the first witness, or the original authors of the report; and it is plain, that Mr. *Locke* meant real eye-witnesses, when he speaks of
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the number of witnesses, not such pretended witnesses, as appear to vouch the rumours of the day. With regard to such rumours, we must consider, that every remove from the fountain head diminishes the force of the evidence, and renders the credit due to the story more questionable; since it encreases the chances of our being deceived, both through the fallibility of our senses, and the possibility, that, in every transmission, the report may be more or less falsified, by addition or subtraction of some material circumstance. All that the augmented number of reporters shews is, that there are many persons, who believe the report to be true; but, when we come to reflect, how anxious men usually are to persuade others of the truth of what they themselves strongly believe; how many interested motives may exist, to render others extremely zealous in the propagation of the story; and, in fine, how the spirit of credulity flies about among the vulgar, like an epidemic malady, and spreads by contagion. We shall not give much weight to the number of reporters; and we shall always remember to distinguish between reporters, and witnesses. In fact, the integrity of the reporter is chiefly to be considered, in an examination of the credit due to popular rumours.

SECTION III.

Grounds of dissenting from popular Rumour.

Although the grounds of popular credulity are fluctuating and various, often inconsistent with each other; various as the passions, prejudices, dispositions, and tempers of men; and, even on these grounds often inexplicable: the motives of our inclining to doubt and disbelief are more rational and certain; nor is it difficult, to establish certain salutary tests of dissent, by which we may, for the most part, appreciate the demerits of popular rumour.

The principle of credulity has its use, in the conduct of life, as I have already observed; it is implanted in man, as the motive of action, by the wise author of his nature; but it is the province of reason, to regulate this principle, and guard us against the abuse and excess of a propensity, which is so liable to both, although, under due control, and in a moderate degree, it is useful and salutary. As reason and morality ought to hold the passions in proper subjection, though they are infused into our composition for the best purposes; so, good sense and virtue require, that we should study and fortify the mind, with a general diffidence, against all popular rumours. We should consider, that they seldom include in themselves any intrinsic evidence, to guide us in our assent or dissent; and that, in order, to estimate the degree of credit they deserve, we must resort to collateral and extraneous circumstances. I am far from presuming, to attempt a complete enumeration of such circumstances, but the following reflections may have their use.

When popular rumour spreads abroad; it should be our care, to trace each report to the fountain head, if we soberly and sincerely wish, to be furnished with such data, as may enable us to form a sound and solid judgment, respecting the degree of credit, to which it is entitled. Thus shall we be enabled to discover and estimate the character of the reporter. Thus we may discern the passions, prejudices, views of things, the temper of mind, whether sanguine and credulous, or distrustful, and the connexions, by which he is swayed, and actuated; and learn to appreciate his motives. If the rumour is calculated to advance the interests, or promote the views of the reporter, it is more than probable that he is a deceiver. If the event reported is such as conspires with his hopes and wishes, it is likely that he is deceived.

There is an obvious ground, for cautious diffidence and distrust, when we perceive, that the individuals or the party, from whom a popular report or rumour is found to proceed, have a manifest interest, which may be served, a palpable object, which may be promoted, its circulation, and free reception; as if, for instance, a rumour emanating from a ruling party in a state, should be calculated, to throw a lustre of popularity

pularity on their measures, and to maintain them in power ; we must believe with caution.—If a report flowing from a party, in opposition to those who govern, should tend to make the measures of government odious and contemptible, and to shake those, who administer it, from their seats, that they may make room for their opponents ; we must believe with caution. Contending sects of religion are usually animated with great mutual hostility and rancour, and employ no small share of industry and malice, in traducing and villifying each other.—When we find reports ushered into circulation, under the auspices of religious contest, and acrimonious bigotry, we must assent with caution. When a story, tending to place an individual in a ridiculous or odious light, proceeds from his rival, or his enemy ; or when, on the other hand, a report calculated to advance his fame and fortunes, or to exalt his character, is circulated by his friends, his dependants, his near connexions, or the party or faction to which he has devoted himself ; in such cases, we must assent with caution.

History is crowded with instances of the fallaciousness of popular rumours, originating from such polluted sources. The *Jews*, ever odious, yet ever necessary in the commercial world, have been a constant object of oppression, and resource to rapine ; they have thriven, and been plundered, in almost every country of the habitable globe. As a pretext for this conduct, popular prejudice was excited against this unhappy sect, and rumours of atrocities, imputed to them, were busily circulated, and eagerly believed. Among other enormities, it was said of them, in early times, that they used to entice Christian children from their parents, in order to crucify them.* The Christians, in the reign of *Nero*, were accused by authority,† and believed by many, to have been guilty of setting *Rome* on fire ; and this calumny became the pretence for a cruel persecution against them.

“ Qui

* See the old Ballad of the “ *Jewis Tochter*,” Percy’s Collection.

† Ergo abolendo rumori, *Nero* subdidit reos, et quæsitissimis pœnis adfecit quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Christianos appellabat.

Tacitus.

“ Qui stantes ardens et fixo gutture fumant.”

With equal foundation of truth, in the reign of the second Charles, the great fire of London was attributed to the papists, and the calumny remains to this day recorded, on the monument, which

“ Like a tall bully lifts the head and lies.”

That cruel and ambitious tyrant Philip the fair, being determined to ruin the order of the knights templars, and to seize their possessions, imputed to them such enormous and absurd crimes, as were of themselves sufficient to destroy the credit of the accusation. They were universally charged with robbery, murder, and vices the most shocking to human nature. It was said, that every one received into their order, was obliged to renounce his Saviour, to spit on the cross, and to join to this impiety the superstition of worshipping a gilded head. The candidates, it was said, were initiated with such infamous rites, as could serve only to degrade the order. Above an hundred of those unhappy gentlemen were put to the torture. The more obstinate perished in the hands of their tormentors. Some, to procure a present respite, confessed all that was required. Forged confessions were imputed to others. And *Philip*, as if their guilt was certain, proceeded to confiscate their treasures. No sooner had the templars recovered from their tortures, than they disavowed their confessions, exclaimed against the forgeries, and appealed to their gallant actions, in former and later times, as a full apology for their conduct. The tyrant ordered fifty-four of them to be burned at Paris, as relapsed heretics, and great numbers were put to death, in like manner, in other parts of the kingdom.—We find this powerful engine popular rumour, employed, with fatal effect, by the opponents of the court, in the unfortunate reign of *Charles the first**. The tragical catastrophe

* In *Hume's* history of that unhappy period, are instances, in abundance, of the industrious use, which was made of the power of rumour. We find, in particular, that the panic

trophe of the illustrious brothers, the *Dewits* shews how popular rumour may be directed by party rage, to the destruction of the most estimable and venerable characters*. But, on no occasion was the inventive talent of faction and the deadly efficacy of popular rumour more powerfully exemplified, than in the progress of the French revolution†.

It

nic fear of popery was most successfully employed, to enflame the fanaticism of the intolerant multitude. Every day teemed with new reports of conspiracies by the papists. They had entered into one plot (it was said) of extraordinary atrocity, indeed, no less than to blow up the river *Thames* with gun powder, in order to drown the city.—And we find the parliament at that time giving a sanction to popular credulity and adopting it as a rule of conduct by their resolution, “that common fame was a good ground of proceeding.”

* When the *Dutch*, in their distress, began to cast their eyes on the young Prince of *Orange*, as their only hope; John *Dewit* who continued to oppose the repeal of the perpetual edict, became the object of popular resentment, the misfortunes of the republic were falsely ascribed to his conduct, assassins actuated by no other motive than mistaken zeal, attacked, and with many wounds left him, for dead; his brother *Cornelius*, who had served with prudence and courage on board the fleet, was obliged by sickness to come on shore. One *Tichelaar* a barber, a man noted for infamy, accused him of having endeavoured by bribes, to engage him to murder the Prince of Orange, the accusation, though attended by the most improbable and absurd circumstances, greedily received by the multitude.—*Cornelius* was cited before a court of judicature; the judges, blinded by prejudice, or not daring to oppose the popular torrent, condemned him to the question. He was delivered to the hands of the executioners, and torn in pieces with inhuman torments. Amidst his agonies, he still made protestations of his innocence, and repeated an ode of Horace, which contained sentiments suitable to his situation. The judges condemned him, to lose his offices, and to be banished the commonwealth, the pensionary, who had not been terrified from performing that part of a kind brother, during the prosecution, came to his brother's prison, determined to accompany him to the place of exile; the signal was given to the populace; the prison doors were forced; a thousand hands vied with each other which should be first embued in the blood of the *Dewits*. Even their death did not satiate the brutal rage of the multitude, they exercised on the dead bodies of these virtuous citizens indignities shocking to be recited.

† Reports were circulated tending to shew the violent intentions of the court, as if it was utterly bent on the extirpation of the *French* nation. The scarcity of corn gave rise to a variety of injurious rumours. The groupes which assembled in the streets were inflamed, by the constant arrival of bulletins or notes giving an account, of the proceedings at *Verfailles*, and of the speeches and expressions of popular orators. One of the charges against the Queen was, that she had procured the construction of a mine under the hall of the national assembly.

It is a safe and prudent rule, to conclude, that where uncommon heat and zeal are employed, in the propagation of a report, and are accompanied with an impatience of contradiction, and a resistance to all free disquisitions, such circumstances are an indication of a fabricated tale, which will not bear the test of rigid enquiry. And we must be still more confirmed in this persuasion, when we find a tendency to revile and depreciate those, who would enter into any discussion, of the probability of the story, or the merits of the reporters. Surely, with impartial men and lovers of truth, such a conduct must be sufficient cause of doubt. The language of truth is calm and moderate; it rests its success on its own intrinsic merit; it does not seek to prepossess or intimidate the hearer; the spirit of truth does not prescribe and anathematize examination.

When a report has a tendency to blacken a character already unpopular, or to villify a sect or party already obnoxious; and to aggravate the load of hatred and suspicion, under which they already labour; we should receive it with caution and reserve; for we may be sure, that the story is charged with much of the labouring of passion and prejudice; and is circulated to answer a particular purpose of malevolence. With equal hesitation and distrust should we listen to the voice of party, when it is loud, in displaying the merits, the sufferings, or the services of the idol of the hour; or descants on its own purity of principle, numbers, importance, and resources. We should class these exaggerated tales, with the legends, which bigotted sects sometimes propagate respecting the sanctity and miracles of their saints and founders. The spirit of party is the grand softener and concealer of all absurdity, the grand promoter of all belief.

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assembly. Falshoods and forgeries were the constant resource and favourite weapons of the Cabals in *Paris*, the most positive assertions, the most minute details of facts, the strongest appearances of probability were made to accompany the grossest falshoods. Some were even audacious enough to publish forged letters, in the name of the national assembly, and forged edicts, in the name of the King, exhorting the peasants to destroy the patents and pedigrees of the nobility.

In times of great agitation and alarm, when the public mind is roused, and forcibly possessed by the violent emotions, of religious enthusiasm, or party rage, or acted upon by the calamitous progress of foreign or intestine war; public opinion is afloat; and men with eagerness catch at every novelty. Invention will then be perpetually on the stretch, to serve the purposes of designing men; then is the reign of prejudice and passion in all its glory; and, therefore, every rumour of good or ill success, of praise or vituperation comes in a most questionable shape. Contending parties, then, brand each other, with the most reproachful epithets, they impute to each other the worst motives; and reprobate, as an unpardonable sin, all incredulity with respect to the rumours fabricated, or received by the faction.

With respect to the number of reporters, it has already been observed; that the mere number of those, who report, or believe a popular rumour, will not give it credibility. If it bears on its front the stamp of interest, of prejudice, and of faction, it will be received with suspicion, whether it is in a dozen or an hundred mouths. The number of reporters, in such a case, will serve only to shew the zeal and credulity of a party; and in times of passion and prejudice ought to raise little or no presumption in favour of the intrinsic probability, of the matter related, or of the integrity of the first reporter. During the reign of party a sort of fascination prevails. Men are no longer masters of themselves; they do not think, or use their organs and faculties, like other people; their understandings, their voices, all their senses are at the disposal of the ruling spirit, the presiding genius, that *rides in the whirlwind, and directs the storm*. The number of witnesses therefore must still be resolved into the first reporter, the accumulation of credulity is no proof of intrinsic credibility.

Let it not appear a chimerical or far-fetched notion; if I assert, that there is reasonable ground, for receiving a rumour with suspicion, at least, with diffidence, to be found in the very circumstance of its having originated with the party, which is prevalent in the government of the community; whether, for the time being, that party is the mass of the populace—the few—or the single potentate. My reason for making the assertion is, that

such a party having dominion over the public strength, and wealth, the administration of government, the distribution of justice, the management of the public treasure, the means of advancing and ruining individuals, and a power of controlling the press, and other channels, by which sentiment and intelligence may be communicated, is enabled, both to garble the evidence of facts, which it suffers to come before the public, and to bias, and fashion the reasonings upon those facts. As it possesses abundant means of suppressing truth, disseminating falsehood, and of misleading and perverting the popular kind, through the operation of hopes and fears on the interests and feelings of individuals; so, it will not want abundant temptations, and frequent opportunities, to employ these means. When *Nero* burned *Rome*, and thought proper to charge the *Christians* with the nefarious deed, the general reception and circulation of the tale was no evidence of its truth, it would not have been very safe or practicable, at the time, to have impeached the credit of the tyrant, or examined the probability and foundation of the rumour, when the emperor himself lent his gardens, for the exhibition of their tortures, as though it were some pleasing public spectacle; and assisted himself, at it; and in the garb of a common charioteer mixed with the populace.

We should listen with caution, and study to suspend our assent, where we perceive that the national disposition is in itself, prone to credulity, and disposed to catch and diffuse with eagerness, the rumours of the hour. *Demosthenes* describes and reprobates such a disposition in the Athenian people, *πικρὸς αὐτὸν πειρασθῆναι καὶ ἐν ἀγνοίᾳ*—"λογίζεσθαι τι καὶ ἐν ;—τιδὲ καὶ φιλοπτοῦν ;— it is usually the offspring of a vain and fantastic love of novelty, conspiring with a sanguine temperament, easily elated by hope, and depressed by fear; and where it prevails must contribute exceedingly to the growth and progress of falsehood. Such a disposition has ever been observable in the people of *England*, and appears in the favourable reception, which they afford to quacks, charlatans and impostors. It has of late years been carried to an extravagant pitch, since the fearful increase of the funding system has augmented the power and importance of rumour, and offered prospects of enormous gain to the invention and the mendacity of those,

those, who avail themselves of moments of public anxiety, to abuse and mislead public credulity. Daily rumours and artful fabrications will be circulated by those, who feed on transitory and floating falsehoods. While the tutelar genius of a country resides in the paper castle of public credit, a breath can shake the structure, and expel the inhabitant. The herd of gamblers in the public funds, whose study and ingenuity are perpetually employed, to raise and depress them, as suits the purpose of private interest, will avail themselves of the believing temper of the people, of the sort of predisposing preparation, which they find in the mind of the hearer, and the avarice, the ambition, the vanity, the education, the prejudices, the wishes and fears of the multitude* will lead them to implicit confidence in the reporter. The destructive explosion of the *South-Sea* bubble in *England*, and the consequences of the *Mississippi* scheme in France, are instances, to show how a few artful projectors may excite a delirium of general credulity, in a nation; and how necessary it is, to suspend the assent, while such a spirit of implicit belief is predominant.

No argument, in favour of popular credulity, can be drawn from the observation, that many rumours and prefages which have appeared improbable and unfounded, or chimerical, at the moment when they were first in circulation, have afterwards, in fact, been verified and fulfilled. It must be considered, how much popular rumours and predictions contribute to their own completion; “*possunt quia posse videntur*” is a say-

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* We have had two very remarkable instances in *England*, of the acuteness and dexterity of those, who speculate in the funds. During the former war between the English and Tippoo Sultan, which was carried on by Lord *Cornwallis*, a forgery of a Madras gazette was produced; it was said to have been brought by a ship that arrived at *Bristol*, and announced the capture of *Seringapatam*, an event at that time very probable. The fallacy was discovered, the stock exchange was filled with consternation and ruin. Another very remarkable instance occurred lately; a forged copy of *L'Eclair* a *Parisian* newspaper was handed about in *London*; it purported to contain the outlines of a treaty between the Emperor of *Germany*, and the French Republic, and was intended to operate on the funds, although it failed of producing any considerable effect of that kind.

ing as just as it is trite. Rumours, which inspire high notions, and serve to produce great public exertions, thus become the means of verifying themselves. On the other hand, reports, which anticipate disasters, may contribute to produce the calamity, which they thus prematurely announce, by depressing the public mind, and inspiring a languid despair, a fatal torpor of consternation, which unnerves the arm of public exertion. Thus, the prophecies or traditions, that one nation should finally be subdued by another, have usually been fulfilled: and why? Because the very existence and circulation of the report or prediction tended and contributed to its completion; by infusing, on the one hand, enthusiasm, hope, and confidence; on the other, panic, terror, and despair. The traditions and oracles, which pronounced, that the *Asiatics* should finally be conquered by the *Greeks*, were, at length, verified.—It is said, that there are prophecies in circulation, among the *Turks*, that they shall one day be conquered by the sons of *yellowness* (which expression is supposed to portend the *Russians*), who, it is said, shall enter *Constantinople*, at a particular gate. Such prophecies, by their operation to dispirit the public mind, and paralyse national strength, might, in the event of a future contest between the nations, contribute to the downfall of the *Turkish* state. We read, that *Mark Antony* had usually with him an *Egyptian*, skilful in the calculation of nativities, who advised him to beware of *Cæsar*; might not the sentiments of fear, thus infused, make him think, that he found his *Genius rebuked by that of Cæsar*; and inspire the feeble and irresolute conduct resulting from despair, after the fatal battle of *Actium*, which facilitated the triumph of his rival.

To dispose us, to listen with caution and reserve, to rumours, and to repeat them with diffidence and hesitation; we may recollect, that even respecting the most celebrated and important facts of history, and such too as pass before the greatest number of witnesses, and make the deepest impressions on the minds of contemporaries, as the circumstances of the deaths of great and memorable personages, battles, sieges, and revolutions, there is often a wide disagreement and even absolute contra-

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tradition between the different reporters. A late writer* has very strenuously endeavoured to show that no such event as the siege of Troy ever took place. *Walpole*, in his historic doubts, has ventured to call in question some of the passages of *English* history, which seemed to be most authentic. *Asinius Pollio*, we are told, found in the history of *Cæsar* written by himself, some things misreported; and it is somewhat surprising, that the account, which *Cæsar* himself has left us, of the memorable battle of *Pharsalia*, should meet with contradictions. Surely, his evidence must be of the highest authority; and yet, *Plutarch* and *Appian* differ from him materially, in some particulars; and also differ from each other. Innumerable instances of the same nature might be adduced from history.

We may remark an extraordinary disagreement in the accounts of a modern transaction of great importance, and, as one should suppose, of unquestionable publicity, the death of the Marquis of Argyle, in the reign of Charles the Second. Lord *Clarendon* says, that he was condemned to be hanged, which was performed the same day. *Burnet*, *Woodrow*, and *Echard* concur, in stating that he was beheaded, though condemned to be hanged: and that, though the sentence was pronounced on Saturday, he was not executed until the Monday after. Yet these are all writers of credit, wrote near the time, and had the means of being well informed.

SECTION IV.

How the abuse of popular Credulity may be remedied or prevented.

It may be enquired, what remedy, or rather what preventative, shall government apply to the excess and abuse of popular credulity, which, like an habitual germ of pestilence, lurks in the crisis and constitution

Mr. Bryant.

stitution of human nature, and social institutions; appears so suddenly and unexpectedly; and produces such mighty effects. The principle, in itself, and within due bounds, is not only salutary, but absolutely necessary to human action: it is only requisite, to guard against the immoderate redundancy.—Shall we restrain or annihilate the freedom of the press?—Shall we prevent the abuse of popular credulity, by impeding and interrupting the intercourse of the people; and by the severity of a state inquisition?—Such are the visionary attempts, to counteract what is inseparably inherent in human nature! Yet visionary as they are, how generally have they been adopted, with one consent, by the rudest, and most enlightened nations!

Cæsar relates, that the ancient *Gauls* prohibited the spreading of news, of any kind, which had not first been communicated to the magistrate.* “Habent legibus sanctum, si quis quid de republicâ a finitimis rumore aut famâ acceperit, uti ad magistratum deferat, neve cum alio communiceet; quod sæpe homines temerarios atque imperitos falsis rumoribus terreri, et ad facinus impelli, et de summis rebus consilium capere cognitum est.” The descendants of those ancient *Gauls*, down to the present day, seem to have entertained the same notions respecting the power of popular rumour, and the mode of preventing the abuse of popular credulity. It were easy to dilate on this topic, were the present time and place, proper for the purpose.

The legislature of *Britain* early turned its attention to the same subject; and has, at different times, interposed, with various statutes, to check the progress of delusion, and to prevent or punish the abuse of public credulity. “The spreading false news, to make discord between the king and nobility, or concerning any great man of the realm,” was punishable, even at common law, by fine and imprisonment; and this law was confirmed by the statute of *Westminster*, as it is called,† and afterwards by two different statutes of *Richard the Second*.‡ It appears,

De Bello Gallico, Lib. 6. Cap. 19.

† 1st Edward 3d, Cap. 34. ‡ 2 Rich. 2d. St. 1. Cap. 5. 12 Rich. 2d, Cap. 11.

pears, from the reiterated introduction of this subject, under the latter prince, that he was very solicitous to controul the prevalence of rumour, and check the current of popular opinion; and he is an instance, to show the vanity of such precautions. He was dethroned, by a successful usurper, who, in some particulars, availed himself, in his artful progress to royalty, of the credulity of the people, and of the circulation of popular rumours, “tending to make discord between the king and the nobility.”* false and pretended prophecies, with intent to disturb the peace, are also prohibited, by the law of *England*, and rendered more penal, than the mere circulation of rumours, because they are more deliberate in their nature, and more dangerous in their tendency, being obviously calculated and meant, to disturb the public peace, to raise a spirit of sedition and opposition to the laws and government, through the medium of enthusiastic hope, or the terrific operation of imaginary fear. Such false and pretended prophecies were subjected to capital punishment, by a statute of *Edward* the Sixth; this, however, was repealed, in the reign of *Mary*, his successor; and now, by a law passed in the reign of *Elizabeth*,† the punishment, for the first offence, is the fine of 100*l.*; and for the second, forfeiture of all goods and chattels, and imprisonment during life. But laws and regulations of this kind are ineffectually opposed, to the natural bias of popular credulity, and the strong prevalence of popular rumour. They may, perhaps, delay the paroxysms of credulous enthusiasm; but, then, these paroxysms will be more sudden, more violent, and more destructive, when at last they do break out, and prevail.

It is remarked by medical writers, with respect to the plague; that, in proportion, as the intervals of time between its appearances are great,
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* He circulated among the vulgar, rumours impeaching the king's legitimacy.

† 5th Eliz. Cap. 15. In 1621, “James 1st, by reiterated proclamations, forbid the discoursing of state affairs. Such proclamations, if they had any effect, served rather to inflame the curiosity of the public, and in every company, or society, the late transactions became the subject of argument and debate.” Hume, V. 6, C. 49.

so are its ravages destructive. The same remark may be applied, to the paroxysms of popular credulity, and its concomitant enthusiasm and agitation. When the free circulation of intelligence is checked, when the intercourse of society is rendered stealthy, fearful, and taciturn, and a factitious and unnatural criminality is attached to the intercourse of man with his neighbour; the general mind will brood, in fullen privacy; it will be filled with melancholy, engendering gloomy visions, and rancorous hopes. Every rumour, that announces a change, that flatters the secret desire, of emancipation, or of vengeance, will be fondly received; it will spread abroad with the rapid secrecy of a fire, in the dead of night; the rulers of the people will be the last, to know and mark its progress; their fears, their jealousies, their very precautions, paradoxical as it may seem, will prove the efficient cause of their being lulled into a false security, by establishing a system of jealous vigilance, on which they will too implicitly rely. The rumour will have spread unnoticed, and operated its full effect, before any pains shall have been taken, to check its progress, or counteract its tendency. They shall at last be awakened from their trance, by some ruinous explosion, by the bursting forth of some devouring flame. Governments which are administered on principles of terror, by keeping the people ignorant, by preventing the free circulation of opinion, and the open communication of facts and matters of intelligence, must give greater force to the artifices of persons, whose interests, or whose passions lead them to impose on the credulity of the multitude. The people, from their ignorance and grossness of intellect, will be incapable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood, or detecting the arts, which may be practised, to delude them. Besides this, it is probable, that the rumour will have an importance and authenticity attributed to it, in proportion to the difficulties which attend its circulation; and the very idea of learning a secret will fasten on the natural curiosity, and prying disposition of men. Thus, though the injunction of the magistrate may silence audible voices, it multiplies whispers and murmurs, and those whispers and murmurs are precisely what he has the most reason to fear. It is for the interest of truth,

truth, that every thing should be viewed in the fair and open day. The sinister purpose alone is favoured by darkness and concealment.

Where, then, shall we find an antidote against the prevalence of this epidemic malady? To counteract what is inherent in human nature must, as I have said, appear even in theory, a visionary attempt, and has been proved such by repeated experience. The growth of the evil may be checked; the consequences of it may be rendered less fatal; but the means, I fear, will seem *Utopian* to the generality of mankind. What are they? the promoting of a free circulation of opinion, an increase of rational lights, the diffusion of knowledge, the facilitating and giving publicity to the statement of important facts, in which the people are interested, by means of which, freedom of speech, and of the press, ought to be maintained. The approaches to public instruction should be facilitated, judicious systems of public education should be adopted. An enlightened and well educated people will doubt, will enquire, will think for themselves; while a rude, ignorant, and miserable peasantry, discontented with their present state, their understandings clouded by barbarism, and warped by their wishes and their fears, will eagerly catch at every report or suggestion, that flatters the hope of change; of change which must naturally be ever welcome to the miserable. I forbear to enlarge on this subject, it might betray me into a length of discussion inconsistent with the form and measure of an essay, but I trust that the great importance and political utility of considering this subject, will appear; and if the slight essay which I now venture to lay before the Academy, should induce some writer of more leisure and ability, to treat this topic in a more detailed and perfect manner, I should flatter myself that I had rendered a service to science and morality.